

BALTIMORE, MD.

SUN

M - 186,878

E - 213,289

S - 345,651

APR 16 1969

Politics and People

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Spooks at Play

Washington.

April abounds in historic dates.

Both prideful and distressful, the less happy counting the Bay of Pigs April 17, shadowed by the accompanying reminder that the creator of that cruel failure, the Central Intelligence Agency, remains largely uncurbed and could embark at any time on another such reckless adventure.

At the time of the 1961 disaster the defect was widely seen in the agency's two hats—the collector of intelligence, also the operator who acted upon it.

President Kennedy talked at the time of breaking up the conflicting roles, transferring operations to some unit unrelated to the intelligence responsibility.

He was prevailed upon against this course, seemingly on the reasoning that in time any new agency would become an empire builder, and the product would be two full-fledged and competing agencies operating in both fields of intelligence and cloak and dagger. Later, the President granted it a continued franchise in undercover operations, the hat which wages the dark back alley wars. The operation function is known variously in the trade as the "spookery," and as the "department of dirty tricks."

A single restraint imposed upon the intelligence agency is that primary responsibility in future military operations goes to the armed services.

It is a restraint of probable little meaning. The armed services have worked intimately with the CIA in past deeds of derring-do around the world. The Joint Chiefs of Staff sat unobjecting through CIA presentation to the President of its project to establish a "Cuban exile" corps, a corporal's guard of Cuban exiles.

As President Kennedy suspected, the CIA seems clearly to have worn rose-colored glasses while reading its own intelligence reports on the feasibility of a strike at the Bay of Pigs. It could occur on other similar occasions, when the agency is fired up to bring off a coup.

Although the agency in making its plea for a White House go-ahead on the Cuban invasion carefully avoided the specific statement, those who heard it understood that the intelligence findings pointed to a massive supporting uprising of the Cuban population coincident with the landings. There was in fact no rising of any proportions. The assault had been so massively advertised—or clumsily concealed—that Castro had ample time to convince those who felt betrayed by him that the invaders were simply a reactionary counter-revolutionary force bent on restoring Batista rule. That was unwanted by any who had live under it.

The advertising included published accounts of the "secret" training of the invading force in Central America, and of recruiting in Miami.

That looseness in maintaining cover for undercover activities was characteristic of a performance that made the CIA the world's most conspicuous secret service, contrary to the universal practice in espionage. So widely known and feared did the CIA become that it was easy for hostile governments to pin on it all the world's mischief, and win belief. It permits the government of Iraq to quiet all complaint about political murders by tagging the victims CIA agents, for example.

In part, the publicity problem sprang from a considered decision. It was felt that Americans, with no history of a department of dark deeds, needed to look upon the CIA as somehow different, as open to the widest extent feasible.

Accordingly, Allen Dulles, the agency's head during the Bay of Pigs, was forever popping up on public platforms to dilate upon the work of the agency, reading from CIA case histories. Whatever the effect at home, the reaction abroad was a belief that the CIA was behind every door, dirk in hand.

Improvement in that respect is now discernible under its latest director, its sixth, Richard Helms, a tall, dark professional. After a blundering beginning, when he became entangled in domestic politics, Mr. Helms has acted as though convinced a clandestine agency should be neither seen nor heard. He seems also to insist that there be no confusion of the national interest with the purely CIA interest.

Keeping his agency unseen is a considerable chore. The Dulles regime was at pains to make it conspicuous, in a \$46 million palace at Langley, Va., minutes from midtown Washington, that is second in size only to the Pentagon in the capital area. It exhibits no neon sign, but gasoline station attendants cheerfully provide directions for reaching it. So eminently visible an organization needs at all times to be on its best behavior.

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